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The development of China makes it one of the most important countries on the international scene, and the importance of China to the United States is rising very quickly, said two US senior lawmakers in an exclusive interview with Xinhua recently.

Mark Kirk and Rick Larsen, who cosponsored the founding of the US-China Working Group last month, hailed the growing economic and trade links between China and the US, as each country is the No.1 foreign investor in the other.

"An economically growing China is good for the Chinese people, good for the region and good for the United States," Larsen said.

Larsen noted that China's purchase of US goods increased by 18 percent last year. "If that trend continues, China will be a huge purchaser of US goods," he said.

Economic and trade ties with China are especially strong in the two states of Illinois and Washington, which Kirk and Larsen respectively represent.

In Illinois, big companies such as Boeing, Motorola and United Airlines have close commercial relations with China. While in Washington, some 400 companies, including Microsoft, are conducting some level of business in China right now.

"If we have bad relations with China, I will have unemployment in my district. If we have good relations, I will have higher employment in my district. I am for more jobs and not less, that is why it is so important to have good relations with China," Kirk said.

Larsen also highly appreciated China's role in the six-party talks aimed at realizing the

denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. "China has been very helpful in keeping North Korea around the table," he said.

After a hiatus of more than one year, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has agreed to return to the talks next week. China has made painstaking efforts to bring both the DPRK and the US to the negotiating table.

US President George W. Bush has said that China can be a partner of the United States on the war against terrorism and nuclear nonproliferation.

Kirk also welcomed China's decision to dispatch peace-keeping forces to the UN mission in Haiti.

"The United States has a direct interest in the stability in Haiti," he said, noting that if Haiti is unstable, refugees will be swarming into the southern US state of Florida.

In addition, the head of the US Pacific Command has proposed bilateral defense ties with China so that the two countries can cooperate, learn from each other and exchange officers, Larsen said.

"That will help the United States better understand China and help China better understand our intentions," he said.

However, in Congress, there are concerns about the rise of China and a majority of members have a quite negative view of China, the two lawmakers said.

Therefore, they decided to create the US-China Working Group to correct some of the inaccuracies and address some concerns that members of Congress have about China, such as the bid by the Hong Kong-based China National Offshore Oil Corp. (CNOOC) for the US oil company Unocal Corp.; US trade deficit with China; and China's military buildup.

"We are not saying that there are no problems between the United States and China. We are saying that we have a diplomatic agenda that is expanding very rapidly," Kirk said, stressing that the founding of the US-China Working Group is aimed at creating a forum to focus on issues of diplomacy in order to improve understanding between the US and China.

Larsen said initially there were only 10 members of Congress in the US-China Working Group, but now the number has increased to 26. "The profile of China is increasing, so more and more members in the House of Representatives are interested," he said.

Larsen believes that the US and China have more common interests than differences.

"The challenge in the House of Representatives is to ensure all members are educated on all these issues, help them understand that we are actually working together more than not working together with China. There are plenty of more places that we can work together," he said.